

February has just begun, and it's already starting. He rolls onto his stomach and stares out the window, willing the billowing white snow beyond the frosted window pane to bleach out the reds and pinks.

The door behind him clicks. The 19-year-old jolts, scrambling to get into a seated position.

His roommate—a good roommate, second time's the charm—enters, he raises his hands in supplication. “Sick of the snow, California Dreamin’?” he quips.

John and Michelle Phillips might have been sick of the snow, but York doesn't think he's capable of such a thing. Yes, it's cold, and, yes, he's fallen in it and gotten sore, but the way it turns the world into a greyscale is *mesmerizing*.

(Plus, it snuffs out all the wilderness noises. He's tried explaining it to Andreas, but he doesn't believe him. But when he sees it—hears the sweet sound of silence—he'll understand.)

Although speaking of *sick*... His roommate is wearing shorts.

“It's 40 degrees outside, Joseph,” York informs him.

“Yep,” Joseph agrees, popping the p. He takes his hands out of the pockets of his hoodie. *Golden Knight Strong*, it proclaims. The words *Golden Knight* aren't, in fact, golden, but black. Only the word *strong* is. “Just popping in to grab the snacks I bought for the Black Student Union meeting.”

York watches his roommate grab a bag of... Hershey's Kisses. They're not red and pink, just the normal silver, but it's enough for something on his face to happen and for Joseph to notice that something. “I got these at the CVS down the road,” Joseph informs him.

But these things aren't for him. “Oh, uh, good to know. Thanks.” A beat. “Dude.” With one last quirk of the brow, Joseph leaves.

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York is reading one of his textbooks, his non-dominant hand nestled in his long, brown hair, sitting at the desk in front of the window, when the door behind him opens again.

“Hey, *dude*. Something's bothering you. What is it?”

Without turning around to face Joseph, lest he lose his place in the chapter, York murmurs, “Nothing's bothering me.”

York hears Joseph drop a heavy book on his bed, but he doesn't hear the sound of that book opening. “Yeah, sure, unbothered people bite their lips when they see Hershey's Kisses.”

The young man flinches.

He hears Joseph's bed creak as his roommate sits down on it. “You're not the only one who's bothered around Valentine's Day.”

York feels his face heat up. He swears he can see the window fog up. “H-How do you know it's

Valentine's Day that's bothering me?" He feels the word tumble out of him again, his throat dry and slippery, like ice. "Me?"

"Cuz I just had this conversation."

York spins around in his chair. He spins too far and ends up facing his empty bed. He spins again. A third time to get the nervousness out. Then, he trains his gaze on the not-golden Golden Knight of his roommate's hoodie. "With who?" he broaches tentatively.

"I don't *kiss*—" Joseph winks at him. "—and tell."

York hears something small hit the ground, too small to be a textbook, but still— Wait, kiss? Joseph blinks rapidly at him. "Um. You missed it."

"You missed it?" York echoes, confused.

Joseph leans down and picks up a silver Hershey's Kiss off the floor in front of York's spinning chair. Now how did that get there? "You've kissed someone?" York asks.

"Well, not the guy I was giving a pep talk to, but yes, I've kissed people before."

"People *plural*!?" York gasps. But he and Joseph are the same age, and the only person York has kissed before, other than his brother and mother, was—

He shudders. No, *that* is not what Valentine's Day is about. He knows that much. The romance movies he's watched with Andreas have made that clear. (Although it's usually *bad men* they talk about.)

Joseph pops a Hershey's Kiss into his mouth. "People plural," he confirms. "Although it's OK if you haven't."

"I haven't," York says.

"And that's OK! But you want to kiss someone."

York blushes, remembering a video call he had with Charlotte. They had decided to try a sing-along, since York was nervous about auditioning for the student group Advocacy Through Song. Charlotte had pulled up the playlist for *Battle Born*—The Killers' best album—and as they sung about flesh and bone, and when the video froze, she was smiling so radiantly. He thought about stretching through the snow into the Nevada desert to frame that smile with his cupped hands on her face.

"Oh yeah," Joseph murmurs. "You have it *bad* for Charlotte."

"Charlotte's not bad!" York yelps, leaping back across the country to defend her.

"Sorry. That was a poor choice of words," Joseph confesses. "But, have you *told* her how you feel about her?"

Told her? But he's never seen other people have to say it. York once asked his mother how she met his father, about what she said to him, and she told him, "If it's real, you don't have to say

anything.” And the movies seem to back it up: The man and the woman—although it can be more than that, like a man and a man and a woman and a woman and a non-binary person and a non-binary person and mixed together—stand close to each other, and there’s a spark, and then they’re kissing, and then they get married, and then they have a boy and a girl, and the boy looks like the father and the girl looks like the mother, even though genetics aren’t gendered like that-

“Whoa, earth to York!” Joseph exclaims. “You’re overthinking things again!”

“I don’t overthink,” York corrects him. “I just think.”

“OK, you just think,” Joseph concedes. “Have you *thought* about telling Charlotte how you feel?”

“But! But!” York curls in on himself, his chair listing away from Joseph. He murmurs ashamedly, “Isn’t talking about it... *unromantic*?”

Joseph shrugs. “I disagree, but I think we can both agree that the *most* unromantic thing is nothing.”

“But if I talk to her, *nothing* isn’t going to happen!” York snaps, anxiety making his chest tight. He buries both hands in his hair, trying to keep himself from launching into the ceiling. “She’s going to say, ‘I agree’ or ‘I disagree’! Whatever her answer, our... relationship is going to change forever!”

Joseph makes a move to reach out to touch York, but, instead, he goes to York’s dresser and hands him the fidget cube: the fidget cube that Charlotte gave him outside the Cheesecake Factory in Henderson. Joseph gives York a few minutes to work on the fidget cube in pondering silence. Then, he tentatively pokes at the silence with a, “Isn’t it better to have an answer, whatever it is?”

York doesn’t fight the tears that well up as he considers his answer to that. “Not if the answer is no.”

Joseph hums at that. “Well, answering no to a romantic relationship isn’t necessarily answering no to a friendship.”

York whips his head up in shock.

“OK, uh, how do I... Ah!” Joseph smacks his right fist into his receiving left palm. “So I’ve kissed people plural. And with most of those people plural, we’ve ended up being friends even after the kiss. In some cases, right after the kiss.”

York narrows his eyes. “...Why are you talking like that?”

Joseph chuckles. “Sorry, I’m nervous. This is an important topic, and I want to get the words right.”

“Oh. Sorry.” York has noticed that some people talk to him differently than they do other people because they think he can’t understand normal words or something. It’s confusing. And he doesn’t need more confusion in an inherently-confusing subject!

“OK, how about this: We’re all adults here. You’re an adult. I’m an adult. Charlotte’s an adult. And part of being an adult is holding more than one emotion at the same time. Or... learning how to hold an emotion with one hand so you can hold another in your other hand.”

York holds his Hershey’s Kiss wrapper in one hand and his fidget cube in the other, testing the theory.

“Does that make sense?” Joseph asks hopefully.

York is honest. “Maybe?” But he sits up straighter. “Even though emotions are heavier than candy wrappers and fidget cubes, I was a goalie for four years! I’m good at catching things!”

“Do you want me there to, like, watch over things-?”

“No!” York interrupts, grinning.

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York chooses to ask her on a night when Joseph can’t watch over things, even if he wants to (which York thinks he does, which he’s seen in romance movies before, but he’s starting to think he should do the *opposite* of what he’s seen them do), when Joseph is at an away game with his soccer team.

In the romance movies, the *spark*—the one that leads to the kiss, anyway—comes at the end. York doesn’t want that.

So after they talk about the latest Marvel news. Well, *Charlotte* talks about the latest Marvel news. York doesn’t really understand Marvel, but he does understand how happy it makes her. He hopes he can make her happy like that too. So, finally, York asks her. “Do you also want to kiss me?”

Wait. His face heats up, and he buries his hands in his hair.

“Yeah, I would like to kiss, but we’re both on our computers, and you’re just so cool, going halfway across the country for school-”

Wait? He bites his lip, running over her words in his head.

“You think I’m cool?”

“Obviously!” Charlotte exclaims. “That’s why I’d like to kiss you! And, you know, do other relationship stuff.”

He didn’t even ask if she wanted to be in a relationship yet! This is going too fast! “Relationship stuff,” he repeats incredulously.

“But I’ve never been in a relationship,” Charlotte continues. “I don’t even know where to *begin*-”

Wait! “Isn’t this a beginning?” he asks.

“Isn’t what a beginning?” she asks back.

“Establishing that we both want to kiss each other.”

Her eyes widen. “! I guess so!” She looks off-screen. “Let me ask Baba...” For a moment, York’s heart leaps into his throat, but then he sees the shine of her phone screen from just out of the frame. Charlotte’s parent isn’t “watching over things.”

But maybe their advice could be helpful? Joseph’s was. “...What did they say?” he broaches.

“Just screaming reaction GIFs,” Charlotte sighs. “They won’t be helpful for a while.”

So they’re on their own. That’s fine. It’s fine. That was why he picked this night in the first place! “So we’ll be our own help!” York rallies. “So we both want to kiss each other.”

“Yes!” Charlotte agrees.

“...But we’re both on computers.”

“Yes!” Charlotte agrees. She looks at her phone again. “Hang on, when is your spring break?”

Spring break! Of course! “We won’t be on computers during spring break! You’re smart! That’s why I’d like to kiss you!”

She blushes all through them tearing through their calendars. The stars align: Their spring breaks have overlap. They click their respective fidget cubes excitedly, the spark growing.

“And we can do other relationship stuff on computers,” York says, trying to tether that spark to reality by giving it something to hold on to that they can both perceive. “The kissing can be, like, the grand finale!”

Charlotte cocks her head. “The grand finale?” she repeats.

Wait! He sputters.

“The grand finale of a season, yeah!” she agrees.

The way York is sweating now, he hopes he can nail that transition. They hope Charlotte's parent will be helpful soon.... Maybe they will ask for more advice from Joseph too.